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Acceptance speech, 2019 Darwin Award

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<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/42867>*Boston University*

Thank you, Natalie, for saying those kind and generous things. I can't begin to say how much this award means to me — especially to have it handed to me by someone who is not only bright and talented and going places, but is also almost certainly my very last graduate student. And that's fitting, because — as you may have heard — this is the very last Darwin Award that is going to be given by the AAPA. (The next one will be given by the AABA.)

I would like to thank Jon Marks, who deserves to be credited on the record with inventing this award. In 1989, just after I had joined the Executive Committee by becoming the AJPA Editor, Jon suggested to me that the AAPA needed to start a Lifetime Achievement Award to replace the discontinued Viking Fund Medals. Jon wanted to call it the Harry Shapiro Award and give it to Ashley Montagu. I proposed this to the Executive Committee, and they thought that was a wonderful idea, so they made it the Charles Darwin Award and gave it to Sherwood Washburn. I kept pushing for Montagu, who did get the award about three years later; but Shapiro didn't make it. Looking back, I guess Darwin probably makes a more striking statue. It's the dramatic cloak.

I have many, many people to thank -- for everything. You know, we biologists say that the properties of an organism are due to a combination of its heredity, its environment, and the interaction between them. It follows logically that none of us deserve any credit for anything.

With that in mind, I'd like to give credit where credit is due. Let me start with the heredity. I am deeply indebted to my ancestors. Without them, I would not be here today. Most of them were fish, but I know that you will not hold that against me. They gave me every gene I have, except for the mutations, which are original. I have copyrighted those. If I had been consulted, I might have suggested some different alleles at certain loci. But I was not asked. That is the point.

None of my ancestors could be here this evening, so I want to thank instead the people who gave me my environment. And that includes everyone in this room. You have been my teachers, my students, my colleagues, my collaborators, and my critics. You *are* my environment. You've taught me almost everything I know. You've applauded my good questions and right answers, and you've kicked my bad questions and my wrong answers to the curb. Thank you! You have made me better than I would have been. We have all made each other better than we would be without each other.

I started this trajectory when I entered graduate school back in 1964 — fifty-five years ago! — at the University of Chicago. My teachers there included Len Radinsky, Leigh Van Valen, Everett Olson, Jim Hopson, Richard Lewontin, Robert Braidwood, Clark Howell, Lew Binford, Charles Oxnard, and Russ Tuttle. What a galaxy! How could I help shining when I was reflecting the light of *those* stars?

I went from Chicago to Duke, where I helped John Buettner-Janusch and David Robertson build another amazing program. The list of teachers and students at Duke during my years there included Rich Kay, Bill Hylander, Elwyn Simons, Steve Churchill,

Dan Schmitt, Pierre Lemelin, Chris Vinyard, Hans Thewissen, Peter Ungar, Susan Strait, Mike Plavcan, Bob Sussman, Anne Yoder, Dan Gebo, Callum Ross, Chris Kirk -- the list goes on and on. How could any fish swim in that sea without glittering?

Out of all these names, two deserve special notice. One is Russ Tuttle, my thesis advisor at Chicago. Russell mentored me, taught me anatomy, took me to Africa and Europe on his grants, and promoted my work and my interests with unfailing altruism and generosity. I would not be standing here tonight without his help and encouragement.

And finally, the *most* important person I have to thank for whatever my lifetime achievement amounts to: my life's partner, my colleague, my co-editor, co-author, co-parent of our brilliant daughter Erica (hi, Erica), collaborator, critic, fountainhead of ideas, and all-around wise woman -- Kaye. Without Kaye, I would never have accomplished half of what I've managed to do. Kaye, I want you to stand -- I know you don't want to, but I want you to stand and share this with me, so that everyone here understands how impossible it would have been for me to have gotten here tonight without you. Thank you.

And thanks to you all for making it possible for us to have been part of the currents of our history. We are all waves on the surface of those currents: little waves on the great ocean of human understanding. Some of our waves cancel each other out and disappear; sometimes they coincide and reinforce each other — but they are all moving in the same direction. And sometimes a wave here and there will catch the light, and sparkle. I'm very lucky to have been a part of those currents and that direction; and I'm very grateful to all of you for having given me a chance to catch the light for a moment on the surface of that sea. Thanks! Thank you all.